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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal studies of adopted children are reviewed, and they suggest a higher risk for learning disabilities among that population. The first study revealed significant differences in teacher ratings between adopted and biological children, and pointed out the influence of parental expectation and attitudes on child adjustment. Study 2 also suggested mild and subtle differences in behavior for adopted and biological children. It is concluded that the behavior of adopted children in the study--nervousness, restlessness, poor self concept, hostilitiy towards adults, and underachievement--suggests a higher risk for learning disabilities. A four-page list of references concludes the report. (CL)

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THE ADOPTED CHILD IN SCHOOL:
HIGH RISK FOR LEARNING DISABILITIES

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In the course of my longitudinal research on adopted children, it became apparent to me that although adopted children, compared to a matched sample of biological children, did not manifest significantly more emotional problems or identity problems, they did manifest some subtle problems in school according to teacher ratings. A review of other research on the adjustment of adopted children pointed to the same result. Elonen and Schwartz(1969) for example, in a longitudinal study of 43 children and adolescents, found that although health, intelligence, self esteem and social behavior were all at normal levels, 47% of the sample were underachievers and 41% dropped out of school before high school graduation. Likewise Bohman(1972) who followed 168 10 and 11 year old children adopted in Sweden, found from parent and teacher interviews, that achievement scores and educational progress were comparable to a control sample. Yet teachers rated adopted boys as deviant in that they were "livelier" had lower sociometric status and fought more with their peers. Girls were seen as having conflicts "somewhat more often" than other girls in their class, but also as more "industrious and ambitious". Teachers assigned a

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significantly higher percentage of adopted boys than controls to moderate symptom and maladjusted slots;adopted girls had more problems, but not significantly so. Bohman found that teachers mentioned more problems than did the adoptive parents, characterizing the types of problems the adopted boys showed as "hyperactivity, poor concentration, poor peer relations, defiance and aggressiveness". Studies by Raleigh(1953),Manlove (1965),and Offord(1969) add confirming evidence in that in their studies,adopted children manifested somewhat more behavior difficulties, particularly acting out behavior in school and community, although all comparisons indicated mild difficulties.One can of course find studies leading to contrary results such as that of Seglow(1972) in England where adopted, non adopted and out-of-wedlock children living with their biological mothers were compared.In this study,the adopted children showed few signs of maladjustment.

This continuing thread of school difficulties in much of this research drew my attention. I began to ask myself what was happening here to lead to this consistent result. The problems were subtle--not real differences in achievement or IQ, but small behavioral difficulties with peers and with teachers. Or perhaps teachers believing that the children were not living up to their potential.I looked more carefully at the two longitudinal studies in which I had

been the principle investigator. What did the data show here?

STUDY I.

My first study was completed at Children's Aid Society of Pennsylvania, where the agency was looking at the adjustment of families and children about 10-15 years post placement. The first volume of this study,(A Follow-up of Adoptions, Vol.I, Lawder et al 1969) examined the functioning of the adopted families. The second volume (Hoopes et al,1970) studied the functioning of the children, looking at two broad questions:

1.How does the adopted child compare in his/her development with a biological child of similar age, sex and social class?

2.What information about both the child and the family in which he/she is placed, known at the time placement is made, will be predictive of adoption outcome?

In order to study the child's adjustment, variables were selected so as to measure both cognitive and emotional functioning:

1)Intelligence

2)School Achievement

3)Teacher ratings

4)Personality measures, both objective and projective.

Such measures were obtained for both the adoptive children and biological comparison children.

In order to study the predictive question for the adopted child, several variables from Volume I-the study of parental functioning- were selected:

1) Quality of parenting as reflected in parental attitudes both at the time of placement and at the time of follow up. For example, attitudes toward infertility,marital interaction, warmth and affection expressed toward the child,consistency in decision making between both parents,and satisfaction in adoptive role were all rated from interview data on the parents.

2) Deprivation in the child such as multiple foster homes, poor emotional nurturing from the biological mother before adoptive placement, age at adoption placement.

3)Data on the biological family of the child.

4)Perinatal data such as prematurity, low birthweight, maternal complications at delivery, attempted abortion, poor prenatal care, etc.

5)Early behavioral individuality or temperament differences with the thought that the more "difficult" infant in the terms of Thomas et al(1963)might make for more difficult adjustment in later years.

A random sample of 100 children age 10-15 was selected from the larger sample of 200 families interviewed in the first phase of the study. These children were all caucasian

children and all had been agency placed. This is important to remember when questions of generalization to other types of adoption are considered.A sample of biological children matched in age, sex and social class status was obtained from a suburban Philadelphia school system. The adopted children were tested in groups at the agency setting, while the comparison sample was tested in school classrooms. The following measures were administered to both groups of children:

1) California Test of Mental Maturity (IQ)
2) California Test of Personality
3) Stories written to seven cards from the Thematic Apperception Test to tap fantasy themes on achievement abandonment, adoption and negative or bizarre views of the world.

From each child's school, achievement test results were available on the permanent record card. Each child's teacher was asked to fill out a rating scale as seen in the Handout.

What are the significant findings on the question of school adjustment? First there were no significant differences in IQ between the two groups of children-Mean for the adopted group was 112.2 and for the comparison group 117.2. The distribution of scores on the personality measure were essentially the same for both groups. Likewise achievement test scores were not significantly different,although comparison among so many different types of achievement

tests complicated the analysis here. The main area of difference was in teachers' ratings. Table 1 shows the results for item #6 on the rating scale and Table 2 shows the results for the composite sum of all six items.

INSERT TABLE 1 AND TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE.

The interesting findings here are that the significant differences between adopted and biological children according to teachers' ratings were in the well adjusted categories--good and excellent. The same pattern was found in the results of item #1,#2, and #3.--child's school work in relation to the class as a whole, child's school work in relation to own ability and child's general attitude toward school. In each case the adopted child did not quite measure up to the comparison child or in other words was not doing as well in school as might be expected on the basis of ability. When intelligence was controlled for in the analysis, it was the highly intelligent adopted children who were not rated "excellent" by the teachers in the same proportion as the comparison children were. The significantly larger number of control children in the "excellent" category of the teachers' rating of overall adjustment is essentially the same kind of finding obtained by Witmer et al (1963) in their study of independent adoptions in the state of Florida. The investigators in that study found significantly more control children in the highest categories of the teachers' ratings on leadership

and popularity among classmates. However, those investigators found that most of the differences between adoption and control groups on the teachers' ratings disappeared when the age at adoption placement was controlled. This is not true in my study: the differences on the teachers' ratings are not related to age-at-placement.

Are there factors within the adoptive families rated from interviews at the time of adoptive placement which might be related to the children's functioning in school? Looking back at the early months of adoption, several interesting findings emerge which are related to later teachers' ratings. These variables are: the father's acceptance of the reality of no biological children, and father's criticism of the child during the supervisory period. Correlations while low, are all positive and significant.These findings on fathers suggest that infertility and inability to have biological children may present particular problems for adoptive fathers and these particular problems affect the way fathers react to the adoptive child. Some substance is given to this interpretation by the fact that the father's ability to discuss infertility was relatively strongly correlated ($r=.47$) with the extent to which he was later critical of the child. The father's acceptance of the reality of not having a biological child was also highly associated ($r=.50$) with the extent to which he was later critical of the child. These same findings were not true

for mothers. Issues of infertility and lack of biological children bear particular relevance for certain adoptive fathers. Lack of resolution of and defense against negative feelings in these areas apparently lead to negative reactions to the adoptive child, which in turn have consequences for the child's later functioning.

Another finding of importance was the fact that parents' early expectations for the child's intellectual endowment showed several significant negative correlations with the later child functioning as rated by teachers. These were: the child's school achievement or work in relation to his class,the child's general attitude toward school, the child's attitude toward his own school work and the child's overall adjustment in school. These findings clearly suggest that unduly high expectations of adoptive couples for the intellectual endowment of the adopted child are associated with later negative attitudes toward school(as rated by teachers) and poor work and adjustment in school (also as rated by teachers)on the part of the adoptive child. We also know this to be true in biological families--that too high expectations for achievement,especially when the child is not all that able,sometimes lead to frustration and tension in the child and thence poor behavior,rebellion in school or simply lack of motivation.(The child gives up.) What may be complicating the situation with adoptive families is that adopted children may on the average,come from biological mothers with less intellectual capacity than the adoptive

families in which they are placed. Scarr and Weinberg(975,1978) have found for example, that adoptive children resemble the biological parent more than the adoptive parent in intelligence. Other research studies of this kind (Munsinger,1975a,b,and Fisch,1976)have also concluded that although the adoptive home can and does have the effect of maximizing potential, there is considerable resemblance between the adopted child and the birth parent from whom the child was early separated in terms of a variety of significant factors.

Turning to parental factors assessed at the time of the followup study, we found that the parents' ability to show compatability in decision making re the child on issues of discipline, school and child rearing in general, did relate to the teachers' ratings on the child's general attitude toward school, his attitude toward his own school work and the level of his work in relation to his class as a whole. Thus the greater the role compatability between parents, the more likely that the child will be rated by teacher as having a positive attitude toward school and toward his own school work and the more likely it is that the teacher will rate his school work well in relation to the general level of the class.

The correlations between parental variables and teachers' ratings, while low, consistently appeared throughout the study. We could find no relationship between perinatal

factors and later teachers's ratings, intelligence or achievement. Nor did we find that differences in early temperament related to later functioning in school as judged by the teachers.The findings in this study confirm the importance of parental attitudes in the child's functioning, not a surprising finding considering all of the psychological research on parental effects on children's adjustment.

STUDY II

My second study was the Delaware Family Study, a longitudinal research project of the Children's Bureau of Delaware(Hoopes,1982) This research had the advantage of being a prospective study, in that certain variables were selected before children were placed in an adoptive home and then at regular intervals, the family and the children were studied with the most recent findings addressing the identity status in these adolescent adoptive children.(Stein and Hoopes, in press) This longitudinal study has examined many facets of these families and children, but let me focus particularly on how the adopted child was functioning in school in comparison to a matched biological child.

From a group of 2-child families in the pool of adopted families, 47 girls were studied in their schools. (Girls alone were studied, because this particular research also looked at ordinal position and there was not a significant

number of later placed boys to comprise a sample). A matching sample of nonadopted children was drawn from the classroom which each adopted child attended. This child matched the adopted child in age, grade and school setting. Family structure was also much the same--that is, one older brother or sister, or a younger brother or sister.Among other measures administered in this school study, was the Bristol Social Adjustment Guides: The Child in School(Stott and Sykes,1969) which had been reworded to delete or change anglicisms found in this original British test.The focus of the Guide items is interpersonal rather than intrapsychic and most items were free of educational jargon.The item choices include normal behavior descriptions and a normal option,"nothing noticeable", along with problem behaviors. The teachers are asked to circle specific behaviors that apply to the child in school and each teacher was asked to rate the school behavior of the target adopted child and two children other than the target child (but matched as closely as possible with that target child,)in an effort to minimize focus on the target child. The schools were unaware of the adoptive-nonadoptive comparison since the study was described as a longitudinal study of child development carried out by the college with which the authors were associated.

In addition to the teacher ratings,material was also collected from the cumulative file of the target child. Here an attempt was made to ascertain the

adjustment/maladjustment of the target child from teacher and staff comments; from achievement test scores; and from referrals for special services, such as counseling or psychological evaluation. No data could be obtained for the matched control child because of the difficulties of obtaining permission to examine a child's file. A sociometric measure was also administered in the classroom.

The findings on sociometric choice indicated that the adopted children were as well accepted by their peers as a group of comparison children matched for age and grade. Rates of referral for special evaluations,or for special class placement(about 10%) did not exceed that usually found in the population of school children at large(about 10-14%). However, the adopted girls did receive from their teachers a significantly greater number of checkmarks for total problematic behaviors than did nonadopted children ($t=2.90, p$ .006). Table 3 shows the specific problem behaviors where adopted girls differed from their matched controls.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE.

The subclusters showed that adopted children were rated higher in anxiety with adults and hostility toward adults than their matched controls. However relationships with peers did not appear to be significantly problematic. The number of restless and nervous habits was significantly higher,and the total problem score was higher. It should be

pointed out that the mean number of actual problem behaviors was not high. Out of a possible 140 items indicative of problem behavior, the mean scores are 14.7 for the adopted group and 8.5 for the matched controls. Although there was a higher frequency of problems, it did not follow that the severity of problems was greater. In describing these children, the teachers checked very few statements that fall beyond Stott and Sykes's cutoff for more severe signs of maladjustment. Therefore it would be unfair to conclude that these were highly maladjusted children.These findings, just as those cited above, point to mild and subtle differences.

Do these teachers' ratings reflect bias on the part of the teachers? Or isolated findings on the children's behavior? Probably not. Correlating teachers's ratings with parental ratings on the child's behavior revealed that not only do the teachers see these children as acting out at school,but their parents also rated them higher in acting-out behavior in the home. Correlations between all of the teachers' ratings and the parents' ratings on the Child Behavior Characteristics (Fanshel and Borgatta,1965)factor of Acting Out, ranged from .40 to .53 for both mother and father ratings.All of these correlations are highly significant. When teachers saw the children as anxious toward adults, so did the parents view them as overly dependent(r=.60 for mothers, .37 for fathers). Where independent ratings were made of the family unit and these ratings indicated that the

family was child dominated, the child was seen by the teachers as manifesting anxiety toward adults(r=.47).

When children were asked about how they see themselves in school, the child with poor self concept in school was rated by the teacher as high in hostility toward adults,high in restless and nervous habits and high in total problem behaviors.

There is also some consistency between interview data with parents and behavior in school. In those families where the mother's parental functioning was rated low, the child was rated in school as hostile toward adults(r=.32) or dependent and withdrawn(r=.39). Where the father's attitudes toward adoption were rated as low by the interviewer, the child was seen as anxious toward adults in school(r=.33).

HYPOTHESES RE THE MEANING OF THESE FINDINGS.

Can we find any common threads through all of this research? Are there ~~are~~ suggested, though subtle behavioral characteristics of the adopted children which have a common theme?

One fairly clear finding is the importance of parental attitudes, particularly that of the father toward adoption and the acceptance of infertility, but also attitudes of both parents toward achievement, and agreement between parents on consistency in decisions regarding the child.

Additional findings from the Delaware Family Study (Hoopes,1982) where adoptive parents were compared to a matched sample of biological parents, suggest that adoptive parents present themselves as more affectionate and permissive than the biological parents. They appeared to express attitudes of fostering dependency in the child, and were less willing to admit irritation with the child or parental disagreement regarding child rearing. Anxiety regarding parenthood was significantly higher, particularly in adoptive mothers, when the children were very young (2 years).These attitudes in turn related to the age 5 assessment of the children who were found in general to be less confident and less willing and attentive in task completion.

One could also speculate about bias in teachers toward the adoptive child. I have noted a significant bias in the public in general regarding adopted children, who are almost expected to be more disturbed by the fact of adoption alone. This expectation comes from the clinical literature on adopted children and families who have, in some studies, (Goodman,Silberstein and Mandell,1963; Kirk,Johassohn and Fish,1966; Reece and Levin,1968;Schechter,1960 ;Schechter, Carlson, Simmons and Work,1964; Simon and Senturia ,1966) appeared more frequently in psychiatrists' offices for treatment. The root of the disturbance was thought to be found in the early separation of the child from the biological mother and the trauma which this supposedly

created even in newborns placed for adoption shortly after birth. It is hard for the nonadopted person to imagine that adoption could be a satisfying and healthy alternative for the childless couple and for the child placed with them. Reflecting upon the attitude of the general public toward adoption, one 15 1/2 year old boy in my recent study with Stein (Stein and Hoopes,in press) on identity in the adopted adolescent poignantly stated:

> It's not adoption that is the problem but what other people think of adopted kids. They're always shown in movies as "the druggie".(pg.90)

In the studies reviewed above, teachers supposedly did not know that adoption/nonadoption comparisons were being made.It is possible however, that teachers were aware of the purpose of the study and that biases came through in the data.

I am more inclined to look more seriously at the kinds of behaviors reported by teachers and try to examine other reasons for the behaviors exhibited by adopted children.The particular syndrome of behavior--nervous,restless habits,poor self concept in school, hostility toward adults(teachers),achievement not up to intellectual potential. What do these behaviors suggest? To me they suggest the kinds of behaviors manifested by the learning disabled child, the kinds of behaviors manifested by

children with some constitutional difference or some aspect of minimal cerebral dysfunction, or processing problems--call it what you will. But all are suggestive of the fact that these children may have learning differences which in the face of frustration in school, manifest themselves in behavioral difficulties, mild or otherwise. I have done no rigorously controlled study on the incidence of learning disability in the adopted child compared to a matched biological child. But I am following some hunches based on the research which I have quoted which suggests to me that the adopted child is at high risk for learning disability. There is one epidemological study done in 1967 by Kenny,Baldwin and Mackie which lends some support to this hypothesis. I would like to report the findings of that study to you in some detail.

This study was conducted at the Clinic for Exceptional Children in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Maryland. The clinic operates as an evaluation and treatment center for neurologically handicapped children.The investigators noted an apparently high incidence of adopted children referred to this clinic--about 4% of their sample when about 1.5% would be expected on the basis of estimates of the number of adopted children in the population of the state of Maryland. In addition to seizure disorders which were diagnosed in this group of 39 children, a cluster of important behavioral symptoms were observed which confirmed

for the authors the diagnosis of brain injury. The behavioral items described a symptom cluster which included hyperactivity, erratic attention span, emotional volatility, and defects in self control. Although intellectually the children measured in the average range with a mean IQ of 92 and a broad spectrum of childhood adjustment patterns, the authors were concerned that these were children "whose capacities for adjustment were continuously strained in accomodating to ordinary problems of life" From data supplied by the families, it was evident that these children had not sustained brain insult after placement for adoption and the early infant behavior reported by parents indicated that whatever cerebral injuries they had incurred, probably took place prior to adoption, most likely in the prenatal or perinatal period. The birth records, where available, were mildly suggestive of nervous system injury. However, the authors were unable to document from sketchy records with many unknowns, whether such injury occurred in utero. The most prevalent report of the prenatal period was the casual,incomplete or nonexistent prenatal care which the biological mother had received. The authors speculate about anoxic experiences which may have occurred in utero and hence been responsible for the disproportionate number of adopted children in their sample.

Although our data are only suggestive, it seems likely that in many cases the original context of the cerebral damage that adopted children show in their later devel-

> opment is to be found in an assessment of the events of prenatal life, a period shielded from detailed inquiry by adoption procedures that have left few records.(p28)

While I do not believe that I would characterize the difficulties found in school in the adopted children I studied as evidence of brain damage--that is a very strong word--I do believe that we may be witnessing some constitutional difficulties that had their origin in the prenatal period.Knobloch and Pasamanick(1960) have researched what they call the" continuum of reproductive casualty" which ranges from neonatal death to milder abnormalities such as speech and learning problems. It is my belief that adopted children may be at high risk for such difficulties because even today, mothers pregnant out-of-wedlock often do not seek prenatal care early in their pregnancy and may in fact have minimal care. Fortunately many mothers are healthy and the fetus is also healthy, but it seems to me that the risk is greater here than in the welcomed pregnancy. Kadushin(1980) has summarized this point as follows:

> Research suggests that congenital factors may contribute to the problem (stresses in adoption families).Most adopted children are born out of wedlock to young women for whom this is the first pregnancy. Such a pregnancy is apt to be highly stressful, and some of the mother's tension and

> anxiety might adversely affect the fetus. Furthermore such mothers are apt to get less adequate nutritional and medical care during the pregnancy and less emotional support.The higher mortality rate, the higher congenital anomaly rate, and the lower birth weight associated with such pregnancies------is confirmation of the stressful context of such a pregnancy for the child. One study of the patients at a pediatric hospital unit showed that a disproportionate percentage of adopted children had "minimal brain damage".----- This may be related to the finding, confirmed by a number of different studies, that when adopted children are disturbed, they are more apt to demonstrate aggressive, hostile,hyperactive behavior than other kinds of disturbed behavior. (p.526)

In conclusion, while this latter part of the paper has emphasized the possibilities of constitutional differences in the adopted child, leading to learning disorders and other behavioral problems, I want to re-emphasize the importance of parenting factors, as revealed in some of my research.The appearance of any developmental deviance in a child, behavioral or cognitive, represents a complex interplay of factors, genetic and environmental and it is not always easy to untangle the primary cause, if in fact it is fruitful to do so, since what parents and their children desire is help with such problems so that the children can eventually lead productive and satisfying lives.

TABLE 1

Frequency Distributions of Teachers' Ratings of Children's Overall Adjustment

Teachers' Rating of Child's Adjustment	Frequency Distribution	
	Adoption	Control
Unhappy-poor adjustment	7	4
Somewhat unhappy-fair adjustment	15	9
Usually happy-good adjustment	54	41
Very happy-excellent adjustment	24	46
Totals	100	100

$K = .22, p. < .05$

D

TABLE 2

Frequency Distributions of the Composite Teachers' Ratings of the Children

Teachers' Rating	Frequency Distribution	
	Adoption	Control
Poor to fair	3	4
Fair to good	25	17
Good to excellent	55	43
Excellent	17	36
Totals	100	100

$K = .19, p. < .05$

D

TABLE 3

Types of Problems Reported by Teacher on Bristol Social Adjustment Guides

	Adopted Mean Score	Matched Control Mean Score	p
Anxiety with adults	2.3	1.5	<.04
Anxiety with children	1.3	.83	
Hostility with adults	4.1	1.5	<.003
Hostility with children	1.2	.63	
Depression-withdrawal	4.6	3.7	
Restless nervous habits	1.2	.37	<.001
Total Score	14.7	8.5	<.006

TEACHER'S RATING

Name of Child:_____ Grade:_____ Date of Rating:_____

1. What is the level of this child's school work in relation to the class as a whole?

☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent

2. What is the level of this child's school work in relation to his or her own ability?

☐ Markedly below ability ☐ Below ability ☐ Somewhat below ability ☐ At ability level

3. What is the child's general attitude toward school?

☐ Usually tense and/or withdrawn and unhappy ☐ Sometimes daydreams, is restless, seems discontent ☐ Usually responsive, seems content ☐ Quite relaxed and happy

4. What is the child's attitude toward his school work?

☐ Never volunteers in class, complains, finds work hard or uninteresting ☐ Seldom volunteers, seldom complains, but seldom interested ☐ Occasionally volunteers, interested in work ☐ Often volunteers, enthusiastic about school work

5. What is the child's relationship with his classmates while at school?

☐ Irritating to the group, unpopular, mostly avoided, a loner ☐ Tolerated by the group, mostly a tag-along ☐ Liked by others and a member of a group but not a leader ☐ Very much liked, popular, a leader

6. In your opinion, what is the level of this child's overall adjustment?

☐ Unhappy child who now has serious problems ☐ Somewhat unhappy child with no present serious problem but who seems likely to develop problems ☐ Usually happy child, occasionally minor problems but no serious ones ☐ Very happy child who seems unlikely to develop problems

Teacher's Name:_____ Grade:_____ Subject:_____ (Jr. & Sr. Hi.)

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